“More Than Evangelical”:
The Challenge of the Evolving Theological Identity of the Assemblies of God*

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In the cauldron of doctrinal controversy at the sixth national gathering of the General Council of the Assemblies of God in Springfield, Missouri in 1918, the delegates announced as their “distinctive testimony” that speaking in tongues represents the uniform “initial physical sign” of the post-conversion experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit. In so doing, they voiced the sentiments of the large majority of Pentecostals who had insisted since the inception of the Pentecostal Movement at the turn of the twentieth century that glossolalic utterance marked the inauguration of the Spirit-filled Christian life. Eventually this became known as the doctrine of “initial physical evidence” or simply “initial evidence.” This essay briefly reflects on selected features of the doctrinal self-understanding of the Assemblies of God and recent concerns about its theological identity.

Commission of End-times Evangelism

Pentecostals saw themselves as an end-times movement raised up by God to evangelize the world before the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

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Forming new denominations, like the ones they had left or been forced out of, was the last thing on their minds. Cold ritual, the “Social Gospel,” and arid discussions on theological issues had no place on their agenda. A common goal to proclaim the Good News in the power of the Spirit knit them together. But despite the idealized sense of unity that prevailed, quarrels over correct doctrine quickly divided them, revealing how seriously they considered scriptural teaching and authority. As early as 1906, they parted ways over the absolute requirement of tongues for Spirit baptism. Four years later in 1910, the house again divided over the nature of sanctification. Then in 1913 another major dispute arose over the biblical understanding of the Godhead. An excessive use of biblical literalism, mixed with the Jesus-centered piety of the Holiness movement, prompted a march of events that climaxed in a division between trinitarian and “Jesus Name” or “Oneness” Pentecostals. Hardest hit by the controversy was the Assemblies of God.1

In order to affix the stamp of historic Christian belief (especially that in the Trinity) on the public perception of its name, the “General Council” approved the “Statement of Fundamental Truths” in 1916, just two years after its incorporation. The “Statement” pledges allegiance to orthodox teachings to preserve the doctrinal integrity of the organization and avoid the charge of heresy from the wider Christian community. It maps out common ground shared with other conservative Christians, while the teachings on Spirit baptism, the availability of the charismatic gifts in the contemporary life and mission of the church (1 Cor. 12:7-11), and divine healing (usually referred to by outsider observers as “faith healing”) explain the distance between them.2 Even though the Council adopted the creedal declaration with reluctance, the times demanded a forthright exposition of doctrine.3 It was their hope that the trinitarian statement would

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1 See E. N. Bell, “The Sad New Issue,” *Weekly Evangel*, June 5, 1915, 1, 3. Interestingly, Bell noted that “[b]aptism was often administered only in the name of Christ in the older part of this [Apostolic Faith] movement in Kansas and Texas, but there never was any issue in the movement, before now, raised over it” (3).


3 The disclaimer in the original preface to the Statement of Fundamental Truths contra-